

Applause Dec. 1991

A Thousand Acres

By Jane Smiley

Alfred A. Knopf. 352 pp.

Among the many arch comments George Bernard Shaw voiced in the direction of the playwright he envied most was, "Let's face it: the things that happen to Hamlet could never have happened to a plumber." Within the limited territory where cleverness manages to masquerade as wisdom, Shaw was right. Few of us will find ourselves a prince whose murdering, adulterous uncle has popped up between the election and our hopes, while ghosts stop by to freeze our young blood with horror stories.

But even the condescending Shaw would concede that a plumber might know disillusionment, disgust and betrayal, or that he might believe he can preserve his honor only by taking an action from which his nature recoils. That is what *Hamlet* is actually about. The lead part could quite credibly be rewritten for a plumber. Nor would it be the first time Shakespeare's tragic figures were recast in a lower mimetic mode. From *The Eve of St. Agnes* to *West Side Story* it has been done with *Romeo and Juliet*. *Othello* became an Ernest Borgnine western.

In *A Thousand Acres*, Jane Smiley has chosen to retell *King Lear* as a novel set on the Iowa plain. She succeeds in creating an artwork with the intelligence and technical mastery we've come to expect from the extraordinarily gifted author of the 1989 *Ordinary Love & Good Will*. But, with the inevitability of anyone reaching for a goal far exceeding her grasp, she fails to achieve her grand design. In the process, she reveals liabilities that the spatial confines of the novella form had been able to obscure.

In Smiley's new novel, Lear is now widowed farmer Larry Cook, whose family over the generations has built a waterlogged tract into an enviable thousand-acre farm, huge by the standards of Zebulon County. Growing old, the gruff Cook decides to split his land among his three daughters, Ginny, Rose and Caroline (the updated Goneril, Regan and Cordelia). We're never completely confident of Larry's motive, but it appears to stem more from meddling neighbors than any Learish hope to crawl unburdened toward death. The docile Ginny and bitter Rose readily accede, but Caroline, an attorney about to be married, balks. Larry cuts her abruptly out of his will. He announces he can live in Ginny's and Rose's care without her, although Caroline, his youngest, had always been his favorite.

The favorite of neighbor Harold Clark (Gloucester) is his prodigal son Jess (Edmund), who has returned after a thirteen-year absence. Originally drafted into the military, Jess, about whose wanderings everything "slipped into the category of the unmentionable," has been off studying Buddhism and organic farming. Now back with his father and brother Loren (Edgar), Jess moves onto the Cook farm where his worldly charm draws the eye of Ginny, saddled as she is with her virtuous but dull husband, Ty (Albany). Later, Jess will also attract Rose, married to the splenetic and ambitious Pete

(Cornwall). The only major *Lear* characters Smiley fails to resurrect, greatly to the novel's cost, are the fool and Kent. Their brand of loving allegiance has no place in Smiley's scheme nor, it would seem, in this novel's view of humanity.

Having given away title to his land, Larry continues to drink, snaps orders at his daughters and expects the same deference he commanded before. Suffering, if not long suffering, his elder daughters weary of his bluster and treat him with ever-cooling distance until a climactic moment when, with a fierce storm raging outside, they shut the old man out. Now Larry admits which daughter genuinely cares about him, and he turns for help to Caroline. His attorney daughter joins him in a lawsuit against her sisters. Meanwhile, back in the subplot, Harold Clark, newly blinded by anhydrous ammonia, realizes that perhaps he stumbled when he saw and now struggles to learn which of his sons deserves his love.

Smiley echoes not only *Lear's* plot but many of its lines. The dispossessed Larry barks at Ginny, "You'll learn what it means to treat your father like this. I curse you! You'll never have children, Ginny." (Lear to Goneril: "Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend/To make this creature fruitful./Into her womb convey sterility.") Larry, his wits unsettling, rails about the elderly in the county nursing home, "Their children put them there. Their children put them there." (Lear on the naked Edgar: "Nothing could have subdued nature/To such a lowness but his unkind daughters.") Harold voices his astonishment at Ginny and Rose casting Larry out in the storm: "Threw a man off his own farm, on a night when you'd let a rabid dog into the barn." (Cordelia on her sisters having done the same to Lear: "Mine enemy's dog,/Though he had bit me, should have stood that night/Against my fire.") A defeated Larry, urged by Caroline to speak to Ginny and Rose, answers, "We don't need them. . . . All we need is this. . . . You're enough for me." (Lear to Cordelia: "Come, let's away to prison./We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.") Ginny, like Goneril urging Regan to "hit together" with her in allegiance against Lear, asks Rose to join her in a "united front." Larry, nearing his end, like Lear recalls his earlier strength even while asking a young man to help him up.

On one point, Smiley actually excels *Lear*. Even more than in the play, we feel in her novel a deep sense of and love for the land bequeathed. Lear's sensitivity to the beauty of his land is conveyed in merely two lines as he gives Goneril her portion. Smiley, several times, educes the spell of this fertile sea of dirt where poor hardworking people got lucky. Hers are people of the soil.

Nor can we fault Smiley for the wholesale theft of her plot. Certainly Shakespeare, who did exactly the same in almost every one of his plays, including *King Lear*, would have approved. A great poet does not drain off energy into inventing plots. At that, Smiley succeeds in flying in the face of a sixty-year-old axiom of Shakespeare criticism, sketching in a character barely alluded to in the play, Mrs. Lear/Cook, evoked often in Ginny's memories.

Smiley's eye for detail is as sharp as always: "Most men walk in their hip sockets, just kicking their legs out one at a time, but Jess Clark moved from the small of his back,

as if, any time, he might do a few handsprings." Sharp, too, is her insight into character, whether of an individual or a group ("Farm women are proud of the fact that they can keep the house looking as though the farm stays outside").

Yet, for all its successes, *A Thousand Acres* falls short of the power of the twin titular novellas of Smiley's last book, far short of the aspiration to be a *magnum opus* that its Shakespearean model suggests.

In saying, "This is my *King Lear*," Smiley invites comparisons that doom her. *A Thousand Acres* utterly lacks the requisite majesty and moral vision.

While she is far from the first to feel such antipathy for Lear that it bleeds into siding a while with Goneril and Regan, Smiley's Larry Cook is no King Lear nor her Ginny a Goneril. Larry is cruel, self-absorbed and abusive, like Lear. But he is never magnificent nor uncrushable; he embodies neither poetry nor any capacity for greatness. Ginny, guided by Rose's hatred for Larry, is merely a feather for the winds of opportunity that blow. With such small characters, *Lear's* cosmic reverberations shrink here almost to vacuity. We finish Shakespeare's play shattered. We finish the novel tired, not even sure we care.

Smiley makes two disastrous artistic decisions. First, she chooses Ginny as viewpoint character, hoping, with no ironic intent, to make her the one whose part we take. Relatedly, as Ginny grows increasingly aware that she may have repressed a nagging childhood memory of unforgivable paternal abuse, Smiley puts Larry beyond the pale of our sympathy and centers the book's climaxes around Ginny finding ample justification for her "filial ingratitude." Smiley stands the original story on its head.

Given so small a moral undergirding, the atmosphere of *One Thousand Acres* soon stifles with a pervasive bitterness of tone, all its characters crying out a petty chorus of "Poor me!"

This reveals what is thus far Smiley's greatest, maybe sole, limitation.

Our best writers slalom a full range between sentimental indulgence for their characters and cold insensitivity. Anne Tyler, John Updike, Russell Banks, Elizabeth Spencer lay bare the humanity of even characters like Rabbit Angstrom who offer scarcely an inch of ground to build affection on. Smiley has yet to demonstrate their capacity for sympathy, that gift the still tuning fork displays when placed beside the quivering one. Smiley remains large-minded certainly, but not large-souled.

The result this time is an ambitious book informed by only the skimmed milk of humankindness.

